NO MIDDLE GROUND

ADVANCING
EQUITY
THROUGH
PRACTICE

COMPLETE COLLEGE AMERICA

Complete College America (CCA) builds movements for scaled change and transforms institutions through data-driven policies, student-centered perspectives, and equity-driven practices. Since its founding in 2009, CCA has connected a national network of forward-thinking state and higher education leaders and introduced bold initiatives that help states and institutions confront inequities; close institutional performance gaps; and increase college completion rates, especially for historically excluded students.

Download the digital report at
completecollege.org/resource/NoMiddleGround
to have direct access to the linked resources.

CONTENTS

WHY Is CCA Focusing on Equity?

Successful higher education systems are student centered and constantly improving. They also are committed to addressing long-standing policies, perspectives, and practices that—intentionally or not—marginalize BILPOC students, students from under-resourced families, and others who were not well served by their earlier education. (BILPOC students are those who identify as Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and/or People of Color.)

Higher education is supposed to level the playing field, but the status quo in higher education is built on inequality. It is grounded in long-standing structures that were designed for the dominant culture and that limit opportunity for other students.

No Middle Ground reminds colleges that inaction allows these flawed systems to endure. If colleges are not consciously and consistently working toward equity—including racial, economic, and other forms of equity—then they are perpetuating the broken promise of higher education.

It is time for higher education to disrupt dysfunctional systems and pave the way for all of their students to complete college. By insisting on equity, institutions ensure that every student—in particular, those who have been historically excluded—has the career opportunities and life benefits available to those who hold degrees and other credentials of value.

No Middle Ground helps colleges assess their practices so they can find ways to improve—to identify inequities, address them, and bring everyone at the college into this essential work.

This document references the Complete College America (CCA) strategies that are essential for student-centered higher education systems. Learn more about these strategies.

> "There will not be a magic day when we wake up and it's now okay to express ourselves publicly. We make that day by doing things publicly until it's simply the way things are."
>
> —*Tammy Baldwin, U.S. Senator*

A History of **INEQUALITY**

Many of your students overcame unfair obstacles to reach your doors—and they likely continue to face more than their share of hurdles.

INEQUALITY

We associate *equality* with fairness. But our country has a history—particularly in education—of using the word *equal* to describe situations that were absolutely unequal. *Separate but equal* implied that resources were equally shared, when in fact they were not.

HOW INEQUALITY MULTIPLIES
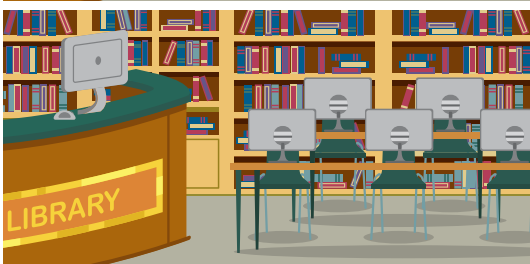
Students from better-resourced communities have access to better educational opportunities, health care, and other services. And those who begin with deeper resources more easily accumulate additional resources—while students from under-resourced communities often fall further behind. In this way, inequality multiplies over time and across generations.
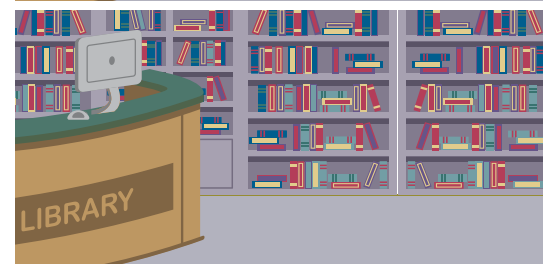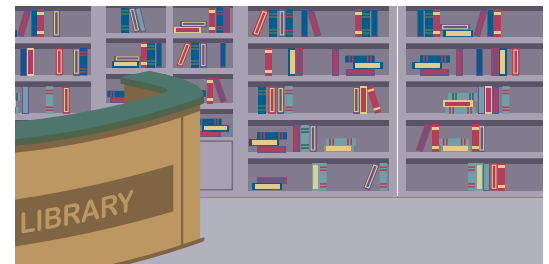
An **equity** approach strives to address this imbalance.

The Power of Words

Language shapes the way we view the world. Historically, those in power have been able to use language as a tool of power—both to create unfair conditions and to give plausible deniability to those who benefit from them. For example, the words *separate but equal* helped establish and maintain conditions that were anything but equal.

CCA chooses its words carefully. We consider the dynamics of language, including which words demonstrate an unflinching commitment to equity and which are less likely to make waves. We are aware that language evolves, and we actively participate in the ongoing conversation about which terms are most appropriate, accurate, and likely to inspire action.

In discussing the people affected by racial inequity in education, CCA primarily uses the terms *historically excluded* and *BILPOC students*. CCA acknowledges that other groups—including students from Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities—have been and continue to be marginalized. This particular publication, however, is primarily focused on the lived experiences of Black, Indigenous, and Latinx students.

CCA aims to choose words that underscore essential ideas, acknowledge the people affected by inequity, and are clear and consistent across our communications. We encourage colleges to work with their students to identify language that helps their students feel seen.

DEFINITIONS OF KEY TERMS RELATED TO RACIAL AND INCOME EQUITY

- **BILPOC (Black, Indigenous, Latinx, People of Color).** CCA chose this term in the context of its work on educational attainment. Using CCA's metric of college completion, the data shows consistent institutional performance gaps for Black, Indigenous, and Latinx students.

- **Historically excluded/historically under-represented/ historically underserved.** All of these terms refer to groups that have been denied access to resources (e.g., education and health care) as a result of institutional racism. In the past, CCA used the word *marginalized* in this context. CCA uses the term *historically excluded* now because it most accurately describes the cause of institutional performance gaps. The term *racially minoritized* underscores the fact that *minority groups* is a designation created by those in power so certain groups could be marginalized or excluded.

- **Institutional performance gaps.** These are gaps among student groups in completion rates and other outcomes. This term puts the focus on the institutional barriers that are the root causes of inequities, whereas the term *equity gaps* implies that students are the cause of (and/or are responsible for changing) gaps in performance and completion.

- **Under-resourced/poorly resourced schools.** These schools have fewer resources than other schools in their area. Students who attend under-resourced schools—who are disproportionately BILPOC students and students from under-resourced communities— often do not have access to the most rigorous classes, dual enrollment, and other educational experiences that help students prepare for college.

- **Students from under-resourced families.** In college data, Pell Grant status is a proxy for family income, which typically correlates with completion rates. CCA says *students from under-resourced families* instead of *low-income students* or *students from low-income families.* We use this term because we recognize that family income also correlates with access to food, health care, technology, and other resources that affect students' ability to succeed.

- **Students from under-resourced communities.** CCA uses this term instead of *low-income students* or *students from low-income communities* to emphasize the many barriers that income inequality creates for students.

- **Structural racism.** Laws, regulations, policies, and practices that are embedded in society and lead to inequitable outcomes. Examples of structural racism can be seen in education, employment, health care, housing, and the U.S. criminal justice system.

- **Institutional racism.** Policies and practices that are embedded in a particular organization or institution and that lead to racialized outcomes. The institution has the power to reverse these policies and practices.

- **Intersectionality.** The reality that social categories and demographics—e.g., race, class, gender, and gender identity—are interconnected and create overlapping, interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage.

- **Structural and systemic inequity.** The recognition that inequities result from systemic failures, not deficiencies among individual people or groups.

HOW Do Colleges Address Equity?

Colleges are not responsible for rectifying centuries of systemic problems, but they can own their role in the current narrative. Colleges can use their time, talent, and budgets to assess their own practices and improve the experience of students who have been historically excluded. This work requires that colleges be bold, know all of their students, and focus on systemic change.

Be Bold

It is nearly impossible to gently wade into equity issues. Colleges must be bold to do this work effectively because every action either advances the cause of equity or further entrenches inequities. There is no middle ground.

At many institutions—and in our country—racism is a central equity issue. Undoubtedly, every institution should be addressing racism head-on. That said, dismantling the long-standing inequities in higher education structures also requires thinking more broadly.

Know Your Students— All of Them

Each college should assess its own student population to identify institutional performance gaps and the student groups that are most affected by them. Then the college should identify policies and practices that can be restructured to help these students thrive.

In addition to BILPOC students, institutions can consider, for example, students who are the first in their families to attend college, students from under-resourced communities, AAPI students, LGBTQ+ students, nonbinary students, students with a variety of religious backgrounds, students who may not be comfortable sharing their immigration status, adult learners, students from rural communities, and students with disabilities. And each college can assess whether it is acting on key issues that can lead to inequitable outcomes. Specifically, colleges can help students address challenges related to food and housing insecurity; physical and mental health care needs; the need for emergency aid; and access to technology, affordable child care, and transportation.

> "Empathy is no substitute for the experience itself. We don't get to tell a person with a broken leg or a bullet wound that they are not in pain. ... The price of privilege is the moral duty to act when one sees another person treated unfairly."
>
> —Isabel Wilkerson, Author

As part of this work, colleges must ask a variety of students to share their perspectives and then listen carefully to what they say. Talking with student leaders is not enough because their day-to-day lives rarely reflect the typical student experience. Instead, colleges should use conversations, focus groups, surveys, and other

means to engage a range of students who collectively represent the student population. Listening to students is the only way to know how the college's actions affect them. And it is the best way to identify policies or practices that might lead to better experiences for various student groups.

While a college may begin its work by focusing on the largest groups of marginalized students on its campus, it should not stop there. For example, even if only 1 percent of students on a campus are Indigenous, the college is still responsible for addressing any obstacles that make it harder for those students to succeed.

Focus on Systemic Change

Too often, institutional performance gaps are mistakenly blamed on deficiencies in particular students through statements such as, "These students aren't ready or prepared for college," or "Students from these zip codes don't do well in these courses." In fact, these gaps are the result of structural failures: If a system is producing inequitable results, then the system is flawed. The solution lies in rethinking policies and practices with a goal of dismantling inequity.

As most college structures are deeply ingrained, changing them requires an institution-wide commitment. Every person's actions will either make policies and practices more equitable, or they will further entrench a status quo that leads to inequitable outcomes.

Of course, college leaders can neither demand nor enforce changes in attitudes or beliefs among faculty and staff members. Leaders can, however, develop institution-wide policies that advance equity. They can set the expectation that all employees will act in accordance with these policies. And they can establish consequences for behaviors that undermine the college's equity commitment.

WHY Should Your College Focus on Equity?

College administrators, faculty, and staff might be motivated to focus on equity for a variety of reasons. For example:

- Working toward equitable outcomes is a social justice issue. All students should have the same opportunities to succeed. All students should have the resources they need to succeed. And all of society benefits when everyone can succeed.

- Leveling the educational playing field is the key to providing economic opportunity for the students who need it most. It is the only way to close institutional performance gaps and improve on-time completion.

- Working toward equity is essential for the sustainability and viability of your institution. Keeping students in college is more cost effective than recruiting new students. Helping more students complete credits, stay in college, and earn degrees can increase your college's return on investment (ROI), a strategy that is particularly important when enrollment is declining.

- Eliminating institutional performance gaps will help regional economies better meet workforce development needs, particularly as our nation's demographic profile changes. Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce found that the U.S. economy "misses out on $956 billion per year, along with numerous nonmonetary benefits, as a result of postsecondary attainment gaps by economic status and race/ethnicity."[1]

> "Just because a man lacks the use of his eyes doesn't mean he lacks vision."
>
> —Stevie Wonder, Singer-Songwriter and Musician

The reasons that inspire various stakeholders at your college to focus on equity do not matter. It only matters that everyone engages in the work because there is no middle ground. Each person is either working toward equity or supporting a status quo that is inequitable and therefore unacceptable.
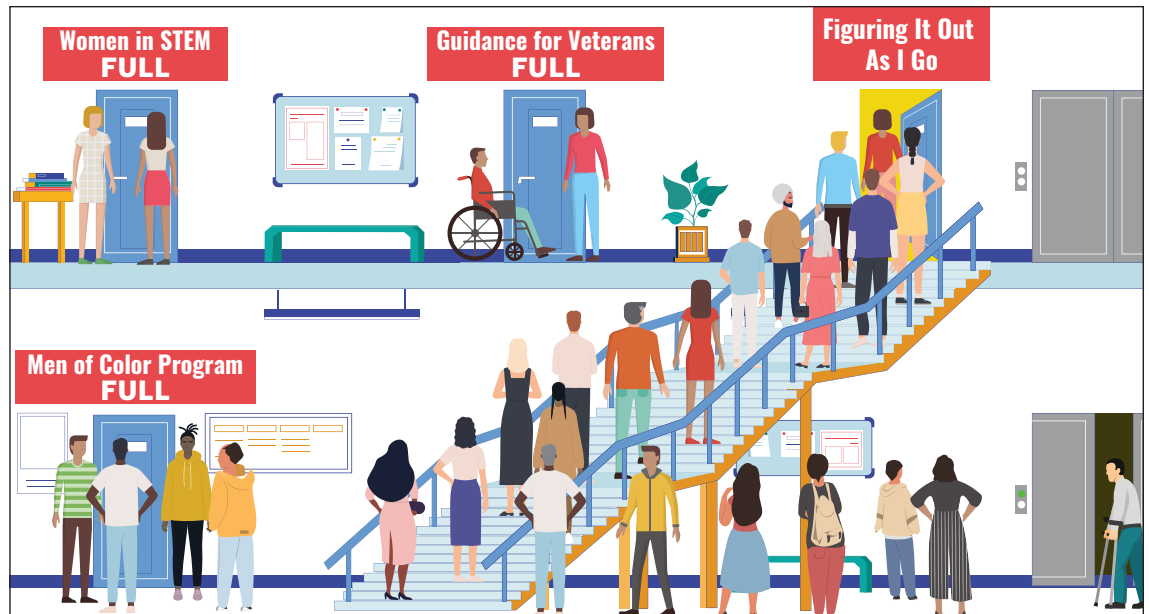
---

1   Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. *The Cost of Economic and Racial Injustice in Postsecondary Education* (2021).

A New Approach to EQUITY

As your college addresses equity—as new work or a continuation of ongoing efforts—focus your resources on building scalable, enduring solutions.

Equity 101.

Early efforts to address inequity focused on creating boutique programs with intensive advising and other supports. These were good-faith efforts, but they could serve only small groups of students. They were not scalable.

Women in STEM **FULL**

Guidance for Veterans **FULL**

Figuring It Out As I Go

Men of Color Program **FULL**

Equity 201.

Today colleges know that boutique programs are not enough. Making changes at scale depends on changing colleges' structures—with a focus on how these structures affect BILPOC students, students from under-resourced communities, and other historically excluded students.

Academic Maps
Flexible Scheduling
Career Exploration

Welcome!

Basic Needs Support
Corequisite Support
360° Coaching

Office of Multicultural Inclusion
Office of Religious Tolerance
Office of LGBTQ+ Support
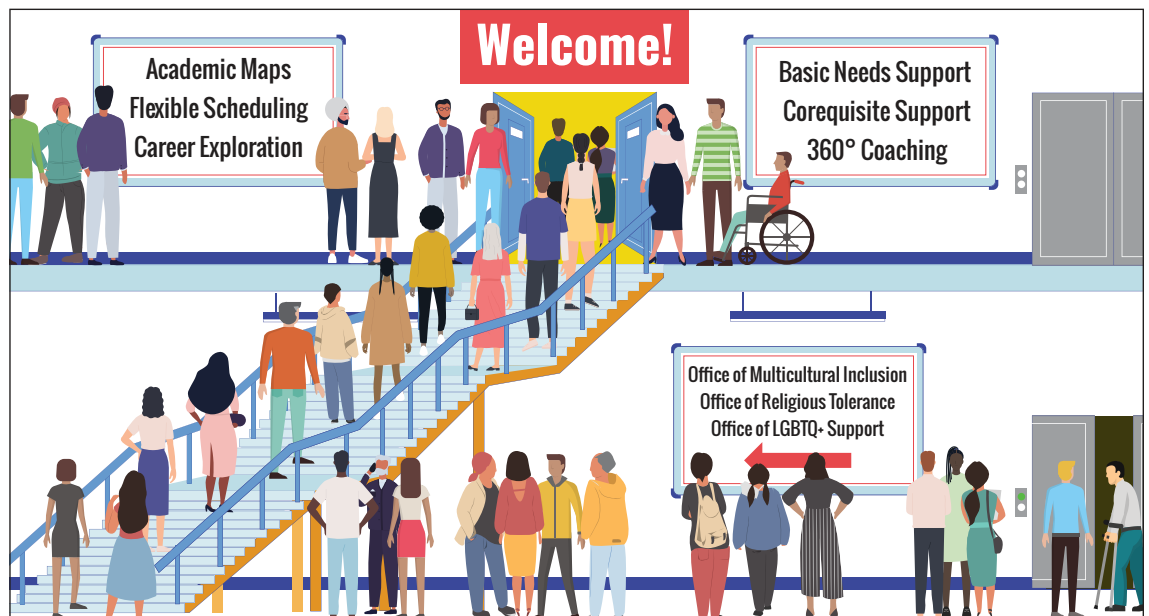
Colleges invested in this work are open to continuing their exploration of equity—and regularly updating their actions as they learn more.

Advancing Equity Through PRACTICE

CCA's strategies outline practices that are essential for higher education systems that want to be student centered and equity focused. The strategies are organized into four pillars of success: Purpose, Structure, Momentum, and Support.

Many of the CCA strategies have equity baked into them. Colleges that implement the strategies with fidelity will have a strong start to improving equity. But that starting point is not enough. Colleges also should revisit how they implement the CCA strategies and evaluate their practice through an equity lens. Most institutions will uncover at least a few areas in which new approaches can improve equity.

In addition, because CCA's strategies address all aspects of a college's interactions with students, it is important for everyone at the college to be included in conversations about and plans to improve equity.

Of course, most colleges are not intentionally promoting inequity. But good intentions are not the measure of success. Success comes from purposefully identifying and changing policies and practices that lead to inequitable outcomes.

The following pages explore how colleges can make sure they focus on equity as they implement CCA's strategies. Often this work involves looking at disaggregated data to identify discrepancies and then developing specific strategies to address gaps.

For each of CCA's four pillars, this guide offers:

Overarching Equity Practices

These practices apply to multiple strategies in the pillar. Colleges can use these overarching practices to ensure that they are implementing the strategies in ways that advance equity.

Strategy-Specific Equity Practices

Some strategies present additional opportunities to address equity. For these strategies, CCA has identified strategy-specific equity practices. These additional steps—combined with the overarching equity practices—will help colleges advance equity within the pillar.

PURPOSE

Aligning the college experience to each student's goals for the future

PURPOSE STRATEGIES

FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE
Develop structures to connect students with resources that foster their academic and career goals.

CAREER EXPLORATION
Make information on careers readily available to all students, empowering them to make informed decisions about programs of study that meet their skills, aptitudes, and aspirations.

ACADEMIC & CAREER ALIGNMENT
Create a clear connection between learning taking place in the classroom and the competencies associated with careers.

ADULT LEARNER ENGAGEMENT
Proactively communicate the benefit of a degree or other credential of value to address the unique needs and goals of adults.

The PURPOSE pillar supports each student as they make decisions about their education and career. Specifically, the PURPOSE strategies guide students through a process of setting career goals and developing an academic plan that is tied to those goals.

Colleges must be vigilant about implementing the PURPOSE strategies fairly. Historically excluded students often are presented with different educational opportunities and career options than their peers. Such differentiated approaches often lead to tracking some student groups—typically BILPOC students and students from under-resourced communities—into academic paths that lead to less-lucrative careers.

In addition, offering the same options to all students (a neutral approach) may not address the issue. For example, colleges may need purposeful outreach and programming to increase the numbers of women and BILPOC students in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields.

75%
of college students who are from under-resourced families or are first-generation students do not start a job related to their studies or enter graduate school when they leave college.

Source: New America.

Overarching Equity Practices

The following equity practices relate to multiple strategies in the PURPOSE pillar:

- Assess recruiting and onboarding processes for students through an equity lens. Evaluate whether students are tracked into particular fields based on demographic factors. For example, nationally, Black and Latinx individuals are under-represented in the highest-paying occupations in STEM, finance, and health.[2] Women are under-represented in the physical sciences, computing, and engineering.[3] Colleges should evaluate their own data to determine whether any student groups are over- or under-represented in various fields of study and develop purposeful outreach programs to address any gaps they identify.

- Provide anti-bias training as needed (based on data), particularly for faculty and staff who counsel students.

- Broaden students' exposure and raise their aspirations by guiding them to learn about a variety of career opportunities that align with their interests. Be aware that students often default to careers that are familiar to them. First-generation students and students from under-resourced communities are less likely to have exposure to a broad range of careers.

- Provide intensive coaching in career exploration activities for students from historically under-represented groups. Guide them to fields—or to specific careers within their fields of interest—that have more opportunity for growth and economic mobility.

- Learn about the barriers that adult learners face, and design onboarding approaches that meet their specific needs.

- Connect students to faculty and staff who can be mentors as well as to employers and alumni in a variety of jobs in their field, with a focus on:

  » Introducing students to role models who look like them and/or share similar life experiences.

  » Raising the aspirations of students, such as first-generation students, who may not have information about a variety of career options.

  » Explaining how the ROI of a student's college degree depends on their career choice—and providing salary and other relevant data for the different careers they are considering.

- Through surveys, focus groups, and/or community conversations ask students about their experiences with onboarding. Work to identify obstacles or lack of understanding among the students, their families, and their networks. Listen for responses that are relevant to equity work, and use those findings to inform next steps.

- Have administrative and program office hours as well as class schedules that accommodate students' work schedules.

---

2   Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. *African Americans: College Majors and Earnings* (2016) and *Hispanics: College Majors and Earnings* (2015).

3   Pew Research Center. *STEM Jobs See Uneven Progress in Increasing Gender, Racial and Ethnic Diversity* (2021).

What Is Anti-Bias Training?

Throughout this document, CCA recommends that colleges provide anti-bias training, which also can be called *unconscious bias* training or *implicit bias* training.

Implicit bias refers to unconscious attitudes or stereotypes that affect our actions. Implicit biases are unintentional and can be deeply ingrained. They also can influence our actions more than our conscious values do.

For example, a person can explicitly, honestly value inclusivity and—at the same time—hold an unconscious bias that makes them more comfortable with people who share their own race, ethnicity, or cultural background. That unconscious bias might unintentionally affect their perceptions of and interactions with people whose names, clothing, or other attributes seem unfamiliar.

Implicit bias is dangerous because—by definition—we are not aware of how our own unconscious bias can affect our actions and decisions. However, when we become aware of these unconscious thoughts and attitudes, we can actively address them.

Anti-bias (or implicit or unconscious bias) training helps participants understand automatic, unconscious thought patterns so they can identify and eliminate behaviors that unintentionally disadvantage certain student groups. Ideally the training is connected to participants' role at the college. For example, training for faculty and staff who advise students will address how implicit bias has historically affected which students are counseled into various educational paths and careers.

Anti-bias training often involves uncomfortable conversations as participants explore how structural racism and biases affect policies and day-to-day practices at their college. It is best to have professional facilitators conduct these sessions.

"We need, in every community, a group of angelic troublemakers."

—*Bayard Rustin, Civil Rights Leader*

Strategy-Specific Equity Practices

First-Year Experience

When colleges design first-year experience (FYE) programs, they should focus on the needs of historically excluded students, including BILPOC students, first-generation students, and students from under-resourced communities.

Effective FYE programs do not take place in one class period. They are extensive programs through which students become familiar with campus resources, build their sense of belonging at the college, and prepare for educational success. Colleges that use this approach to FYE programs give their students a strong start. They also normalize the use of campus resources, which helps eliminate the stigma attached to them and makes students more likely to use them.

To make FYE experiences more equitable, colleges should design them to:

- **Be comprehensive.** Effective FYE programs assist students in all aspects of their transition to college: onboarding advisory services, summer bridge programs, student-teacher connection events, academic and cocurricular workshops, and so on.

- **Teach growth mindset.** Many students begin college with negative beliefs about their ability to learn. Growth mindset interventions teach students how their brains work and that intelligence is not fixed. Small amounts of time spent on these concepts improve students' confidence as learners, increase their sense of belonging, and prepare them to manage academic challenges more effectively.

- **Be mandatory.** If every student is required to complete the same FYE program, every student will be familiar with and able to access the same resources.

> "Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better."
>
> —*Maya Angelou, Poet*
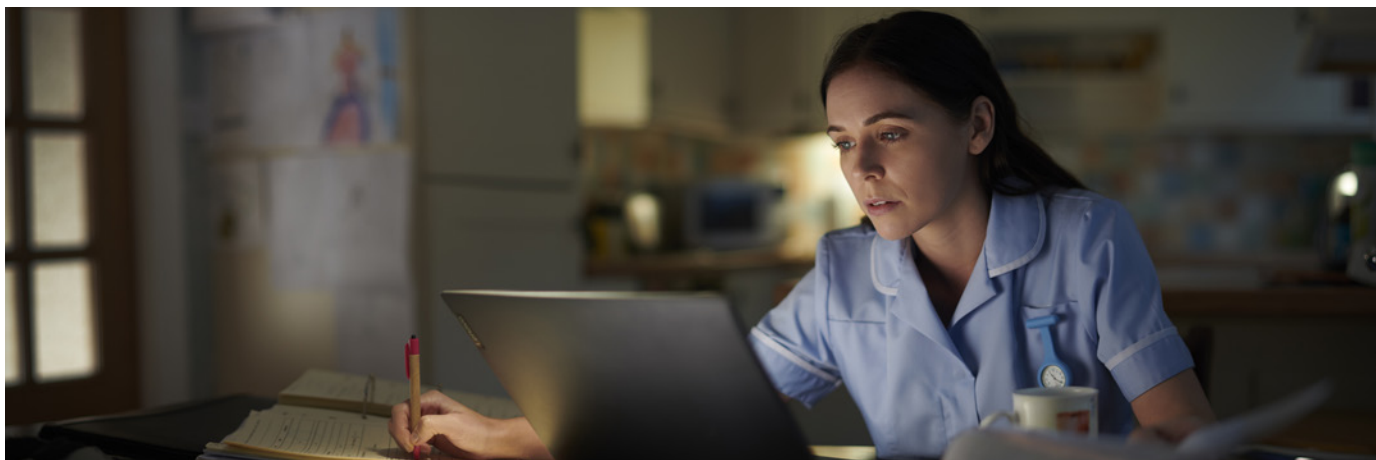
Career Exploration

Career exploration is an essential part of broadening students' exposure and raising their aspirations. It also is the time to make sure students know: (a) the relative cost of different academic paths; (b) the different careers each academic path can lead to; and (c) the earning potential of each of these careers.

To make career exploration equitable, colleges should:

- Use disaggregated data to explore whether race and other demographic factors have affected your students' educational and career choices. Look at data over time to identify any patterns that might exist. For example, evaluate:
  - » Representation—by race, ethnicity, and gender—in various majors, particularly STEM and other high-earning fields.
  - » Career entrance based on race and other demographic factors.
  - » The impact of these patterns on salary and lifetime wealth attainment.
- Develop interventions to counteract patterns of exclusion. For example:
  - » Conduct training for academic advisers and faculty that focuses on how students are guided toward various careers. These sessions can use the college's data about which students enter each career to ground discussions about which students are under-represented in each field and what changes can lead to more equitable outcomes.

- » Recognize that not all students are aware of all career options. In particular, historically excluded students may need more coaching to embrace career options in fields in which their demographic is currently under-represented.
- » Provide major and career information to all students, not just those who are undeclared.
- » Create a structure and activities that lead students to actively engage with the content.
- » Focus on broadening students' exposure, raising their aspirations, and guiding them to careers with more opportunity for growth and economic mobility.
- » Communicate with families about majors and careers that may not be commonly known so students can more easily share career information—in particular, data about high-value career choices that align with their goals and aptitudes—with their families.
- » Require anti-bias training for advisers and faculty when needed.

STRUCTURE STRATEGIES

MATH PATHWAYS
Identify the appropriate gateway math course that is aligned with the skills students need for their chosen program of study.

META MAJORS
Provide students with opportunities to explore related programs of study that allow them to make more informed and deliberate decisions about their majors, while making progress toward their degrees.

ACADEMIC MAPS & MILESTONES
Delineate the path to graduation and highlight significant milestones that contribute to student success in a clear and comprehensive format.

SMART SCHEDULES
Design schedules that contribute to degree progression and meet the needs of all students.

STACKABLE CERTIFICATES & CREDENTIALS
Create competency-driven structures that encourage lifelong learning and attainment of degrees of value.

The STRUCTURE pillar includes strategies that make sure students have coherent and logical academic plans. These plans should include math requirements that are aligned with the skills each student will need, clear course sequences, and classes that are available when students need to take them.

When colleges design and build pathways and meta majors, they should make sure that each incoming student takes math courses that are relevant to their program of study and career goals—and that students' math options in college are not limited based on their prior math experience.[4] For example, students from under-resourced high schools—who may not have had access to precalculus classes in high school—should have opportunities to succeed in STEM programs in college.

Colleges also must evaluate whether students are fairly advised into various meta majors and career choices. This work is more fully addressed in the PURPOSE pillar.

ABOUT 1/2 of excess credits result from poor or inadequate advising, unavailable courses, transfer issues, or degree requirements.

Source: Complete College America

---

4   Pathways are clear roadmaps of courses that students must complete to earn a particular degree or certificate. Meta majors are collections of academic majors that have related courses, such as Business, Health Sciences, and Social Sciences.

Overarching Equity Practices

The following equity practices relate to multiple strategies in the STRUCTURE pillar:

- Ensure that all pathways include rich, engaging content and lead to credentials with high labor-market value so they result in high earning potential for students.

- Create meta majors with multiple entry points so students from under-resourced high schools are not shut out of certain pathways or careers. For example, create a pathway (if necessary, a longer pathway) that allows students to pursue a STEM career even if they need to scaffold their math course requirements and study college algebra in their first term.

- Recruit BILPOC students and women into STEM majors, which provide degrees with labor-market advantages. Take steps to ensure not only that these students are welcomed and supported throughout their college experience but also that they experience a sense of belonging in these programs. (See the Math Pathways equity practices for examples of how to do this work.)

- Partner with high schools to recruit BILPOC students, women, first-generation students, and students from under-resourced communities into majors that lead to more lucrative careers.

- Conduct anti-bias training that focuses on why colleges track students and how to avoid slipping into that pitfall of unfair advising.

- Train faculty and staff to be aware of—and avoid introducing or reinforcing—stereotype threat. Students face stereotype threat when they are concerned about confirming negative stereotypes about their own racial, ethnic, gender, or cultural group. For example, a student might worry that performing badly on a test will confirm people's negative beliefs about the intelligence of their race, ethnicity, or gender. Stereotype threat can create hyper-vigilance and stress that make focusing on learning and engaging with peers harder. In addition to not introducing or reinforcing stereotype threat, faculty and staff can counter it by making sure historically excluded students believe they belong at the college and feel valued by their teachers and peers.

- Have a diverse faculty so your college has representation across demographic categories in all fields, particularly STEM majors.

- Require that all meta majors include specific guidelines about how to complete each degree program—and that all students know exactly what they need to do to graduate on time.

- Embed stackable credentials—making sure they are credentials that lead to economic mobility—into a variety of degree programs. When stackable credentials have progressively more value in the workplace, students can earn a credential that expands their earning potential, gain work experience, and return to college to earn a more advanced credential. In addition to encouraging lifelong learning, this approach allows students to earn increasingly higher salaries as they progress through their education.

- Through surveys or focus groups, ask students about their experiences with math pathways, meta majors, and academic milestones. Listen for responses that are relevant to equity work, and use those findings to inform next steps.

- Schedule courses at flexible times so students who are working and/or caring for dependents can complete their degrees on time.

Strategy-Specific Equity Practices

Math Pathways

Students who complete a college-level math course within their first academic year are more likely to earn a postsecondary credential. And students are more likely to reach this milestone when colleges identify an appropriate gateway math course for each program of study.

Many institutions use College Algebra as the default math course for all students even though national math faculty leaders believe that this level of algebra should be used primarily as preparation for calculus. When colleges design alternative, yet equally rigorous, math pathways—including quantitative reasoning and statistics—they enable students to enroll in mathematics courses that are aligned with and relevant to their chosen program of study. To make math pathways equitable,[5] colleges should:

- Develop inclusive notions of rigor. For example, define rigor in terms of what employers need, rather than traditional algebra-intensive content. Many employers report that they value critical-thinking and problem-solving skills over knowledge of high-level or technical mathematics.

- Make mathematics relevant. Show how math content connects to students' areas of study.

- Identify placement measures and high school math opportunities that privilege students by race, high school, or zip code, and develop interventions to counteract patterns of exclusion. For example, use more complex placement practices (student self-placement, high school grade point average [GPA], high school coursework, and so on) to assess placement more comprehensively.

- Teach math by using materials, problems, and projects that relate to students' lived experiences. For example, use issues such as redistricting, urban planning, education funding, and water quality as the context for mathematical models.

- Foster students' math identity and sense of belonging by:

  » Teaching students about growth mindset. (See page 13 for more information about growth mindset.)

  » Hiring instructors who believe all students can succeed and have high expectations for historically excluded students.

  » Providing culturally relevant instruction that shows students how math relates to their career goals and their lived experiences, rather than teaching it only as an abstraction.

---

5 Just Equations. *Solving for Equity in Practice: New Insights on Advancing College Math Opportunity and Success* (2021).

MOMENTUM

Designing multiple avenues for students to get started, earn credits faster, and stay on track to graduate

MOMENTUM STRATEGIES

CREDIT FOR COMPETENCY
Recognize the prior learning, skills, and knowledge that students possess and establish mechanisms to award appropriate credits.

MULTIPLE MEASURES
Consider a variety of placement options that include high school grade point average to provide more ways for students to take a college-level class in their first semester.

COREQUISITE SUPPORT
Design structures and pedagogical approaches for students needing or requesting additional support to succeed in college-level foundational math and English courses that allow students to complete requirements in a single academic term.

DUAL ENROLLMENT
Provide high school students opportunities to take college classes while they are still in high school so they can get an early start on college.

15 TO FINISH/STAY ON TRACK
Invest in coordinated communications efforts and structural solutions to match student credit loads with the credits needed for on-time graduation for both part-time and full-time students.

MOMENTUM is about guiding students as they gain and sustain critical progress at the beginning of their college journey. When students are successful early on, they are more likely to reach the finish line.

Yet some student groups—including BILPOC students and students from under-resourced families—face obstacles that can make attaining this early success harder. Focusing on equity for the MOMENTUM strategies can help ensure that all students begin college with the tools they need to attain their educational goals.

71%
of Black first-time students are enrolled in remediation compared to 54% of their White peers.

Source: State Higher Education Executive Officers and Complete College America

Complete College America

Overarching Equity Practices

The following equity practices relate to multiple strategies in the MOMENTUM pillar:

- Use an asset-based approach to recognize and build on the potential of all students—and eliminate biases that can punish students who come from under-resourced high schools.

- Limit—or better still, eliminate—the use of placement tests. Data demonstrates that high school GPA is a better indicator of student success, and placement tests create high-stakes barriers to college rather than welcoming students.

- Train faculty and staff to be aware of—and avoid introducing or reinforcing—stereotype threat. (See the Overarching Equity Practices for STRUCTURE, page 16, for an explanation of stereotype threat.)

- Teach students and their families about time to degree and related issues, such as the financial benefits of getting an early start (dual enrollment and credit for competencies), getting college credit for every course (corequisite support), and staying on track.

- Through surveys or focus groups, ask students about their experiences with various MOMENTUM strategies. Listen for responses that are relevant to equity work, and use those findings to inform next steps.

> "However difficult life may seem, there is always something you can do and succeed at."
>
> —Stephen Hawking, Theoretical Physicist

Strategy-Specific Equity Practices

Credit for Competency

Many students come to college with experiential learning from military training, work experience, or other formal training that happened outside of the traditional college classroom. Credit for prior learning (CPL) gives students college credit for these experiences so their classroom learning builds on the skills they already have. CPL also shortens time to completion, particularly for Black and Latinx students, while increasing enrollment and completion rates. To make CPL equitable, colleges should:

- Assess competencies in a variety of ways, including course equivalencies and combining competencies from multiple courses.

- Assess whether there are differences in who receives CPL credit at your college, and then act to close any gaps. Nationally, Black students and adult learners from under-resourced communities were shown to receive strong boosts to credential completion from CPL credit—but they were the least likely to receive such credit.[6]

- Make sure that CPL is made available to all students—and that all students are aware of it.

- Eliminate bias against competencies earned outside of academia, and communicate broadly about all types of CPL.

Corequisite Support

Traditional prerequisite remediation has disastrous outcomes for students. It also disproportionately disenfranchises BILPOC students, first-generation students, students from under-resourced families, and students from poorly resourced high schools, all of whom are disproportionately placed into remediation. Colleges that continue to use traditional prerequisite remediation perpetuate long-standing inequities.

Corequisite education is proven to close institutional performance gaps for passing college-level math and English. Every college should be working toward eliminating traditional prerequisite remediation and replacing it with corequisite support or another proven model that allows students to move directly into college-level courses.

Implemented correctly, corequisite education includes culturally responsive teaching and other changes to teaching methods. To learn more about doing so, see CCA's *No Room for Doubt.*

---

6   Council for Adult and Experiential Learning. *Equity Paradoxes in The PLA Boost* (2021).

Strategy-Specific Equity Practices

Dual Enrollment

Dual enrollment provides a way for students to earn credits in high school and experience initial college success. It has financial benefits for students and helps them stay on track to on-time completion. Dual enrollment is especially effective when coursework is paired with college advising and teaching college navigation skills.

Colleges should take care to ensure that dual enrollment is offered to all students in their community. In many areas, under-resourced high schools are less likely to offer dual enrollment than nearby high schools that are more affluent. Moreover, when under-resourced high schools offer dual enrollment, the options often are limited to English composition or basic math even though better-resourced high schools in the same area offer dual enrollment opportunities for upper-level math, social sciences, and the arts.

To make dual enrollment equitable, colleges should:

- Partner with a variety of high schools so the students who can benefit most from dual enrollment have access to the programs. Commit to partnering with under-resourced high schools and those that serve large numbers of first-generation students.

- Offer rigorous and varied dual enrollment courses consistently across the high schools in your service area.

- Make sure dual enrollment classes teach students how to navigate college so they thoroughly understand the college process, develop a sense of belonging, and begin to see themselves as college students.

- Make sure your dual enrollment program has a funding mechanism that removes financial barriers and, ideally, includes a no-cost option for qualifying students.

- Communicate clearly and regularly with high schools to ensure that students' dual enrollment courses align with their intended programs of study.

- Actively recruit dual enrollment students—particularly students who match the demographics of your local community—to complete their degrees at your college.

"It always seems impossible until it's done."

—Nelson Mandela, First President of South Africa

SUPPORT

Addressing student needs and removing barriers to academic success

SUPPORT STRATEGIES

ACTIVE ACADEMIC SUPPORT
Provide students with programs and services to help them develop the academic skills needed to be successful.

PROACTIVE ADVISING
Require advisers to take a preemptive approach that anticipates and helps eliminate concerns, roadblocks, and barriers affecting student success. Through strategic and consistent outreach, ensure that advisers are a resource for students, working with them to create a holistic plan for a timely graduation.

360° COACHING
Provide students with a designated coach to contact whenever issues arise in and outside of the classroom. Train coaches to work with students to find answers, identify appropriate resources, and advocate or intervene on their behalf.

STUDENT BASIC NEEDS SUPPORT
Ensure that students have access to food, housing, child care, physical and mental health services, financial assistance, and transportation.

Many of today's students are working and caring for dependents while attending college. A growing number also may be facing food and housing insecurity, physical and mental health care needs, or challenges accessing technology, child care, and transportation. One unaffordable car repair can derail some students' education.

Institutions committed to equity provide a variety of wraparound supports—including academic support and support to meet basic needs—to eliminate the obstacles that stand between each student and their academic goals.

ROUGHLY

60%

**of college students experience basic needs insecurity.**

Source: The Hope Center.

Overarching Equity Practices

The following equity practices relate to multiple strategies in the SUPPORT pillar:

- Use disaggregated data to determine if certain student groups—such as BILPOC students or first-generation students—are more or less likely to use campus support services. If you find gaps, take action to close them. For example, reach out to identified communities directly, explain available resources, and make sure students know how to access them. Colleges also might create an incentive, such as a pizza lunch, for students from identified communities who use specific services on a particular day.

- Require students to use academic supports if faculty members recommend them. If these supports are optional, students who need the resources often are the least likely to use them.

- Create a culturally competent campus with culturally responsive resources so BILPOC students can access support throughout the campus rather than in siloed spaces, such as Black Student Unions.

- Provide faculty and staff with sufficient training to meet students' needs.

- Through surveys or focus groups, ask students about their experiences with accessing and using supports on campus. Listen for responses that are relevant to equity work, and use those findings to inform next steps.
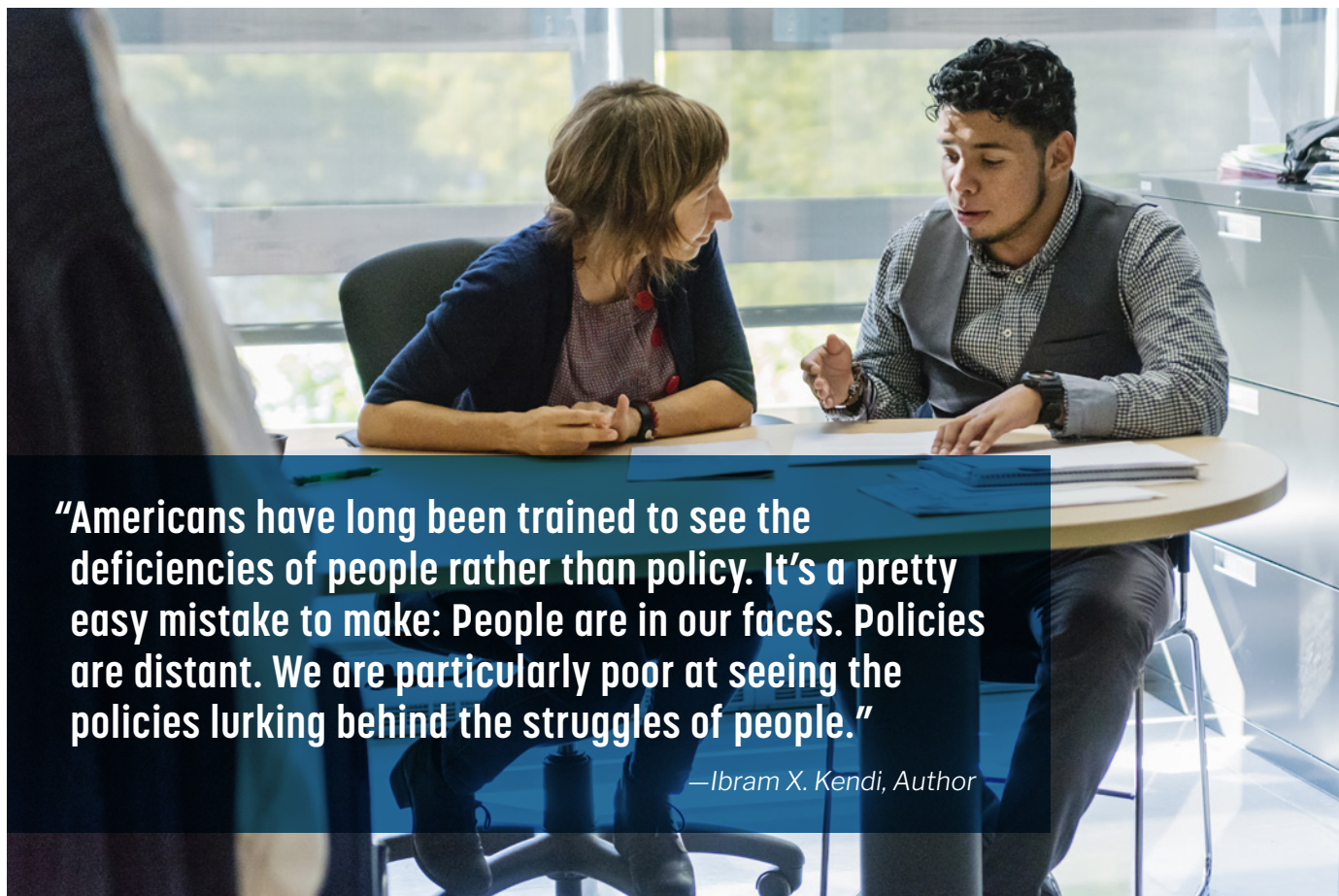
"Americans have long been trained to see the deficiencies of people rather than policy. It's a pretty easy mistake to make: People are in our faces. Policies are distant. We are particularly poor at seeing the policies lurking behind the struggles of people."

—Ibram X. Kendi, Author

Strategy-Specific Equity Practices

Proactive Advising

Because advising is central to student success, regularly evaluating it through an equity lens is essential. To make proactive advising equitable, colleges should:

- Require implicit and unconscious bias training for all advisers.

- Use data to determine if students from different groups—particularly groups that have been historically excluded—are being advised into different meta majors or careers than their peers. Develop strategies to address any patterns of inequity. For example, share relevant data with staff and engage in discussions about why the college is having these outcomes and how advisers collectively can address and eliminate disparities.

- Survey students as part of evaluating advisers.

- Offer advising at flexible times and through multiple modalities to accommodate students' schedules.

- Provide training and adequate staffing so your college can offer holistic advising.

- Diversify your advising staff so it includes advisers who share the lived experiences of the student population.

- Consider the unique challenges various students face. For example, what challenges do first-generation students face, and how can advisers help those students address those challenges? What barriers do BILPOC students face? And so on.

Student Basic Needs Support

Meeting basic needs is a barrier to education for many students, and the challenge has grown significantly in recent years. Identifying and removing these barriers is an equity issue. To advance equity, colleges should:

- Make sure faculty and staff are aware of campus and community resources so they can guide students to the support they need.

- Create emergency loan or grant programs.

- Consider the unique needs of different types of students, such as parents, former foster youth, students of incarcerated parents, veterans, and so on. Provide training to advisers and others on campus as needed.

- Have application questions that identify needs rather than assuming the college can determine each student's needs based on demographic information.

NEXT STEPS
The Ongoing Work of Equity

CCA is a learning organization, and our understanding of equity continues to evolve. While we are proud of our work so far, we are not satisfied. We continue to explore equity and engage with leaders on this issue.

We encourage colleges to be equity-focused institutions, and that means continuing to explore issues related to equity, being open to learning information that is challenging, and being willing to make changes when they are needed. Most importantly, it means asking a broad range of students to discuss their college experiences, listening carefully to their responses, and acting on the information they share.

Colleges also can look to Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs), which are leaders in meeting the needs of historically excluded students, for examples of how to successfully meet the needs of BILPOC students, first-generation students, and students from under-resourced communities. MSIs include Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Tribal Colleges, Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), and Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs).

CCA is engaged in a variety of projects and initiatives with MSIs. These include:

- Leading student success efforts with a cohort of Predominantly Black and Historically Black Community Colleges to develop pathways for students of color.

- Working with six HBCUs to design a model for digital learning infrastructure to support student success at HBCUs.

- Working with HBCUs and HSIs to implement 15 to Finish strategies at their institutions.

- Co-sponsoring an Academic Advising Summit for HBCUs that focused on the specific needs of HBCUs related to academic advising. For this project, CCA partnered with NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising.

In the coming months, CCA will further explore issues specific to marginalized groups who are not the focus of this publication. CCA also will produce a number

of reports that expand on our efforts to help colleges address equity in their day-to-day operations and long-term planning. Upcoming publications with a strong focus on equity include:

- A data management guide and toolkit to help colleges identify what metrics to use to advance their institutional goals and equity agenda.

- A guide to creating equity-driven policies—state-level policies that are aimed at transforming colleges and universities so that their practices close institutional performance gaps and increase college completion rates. This guide will serve as a companion piece to a report by the University of Southern California's Race and Equity Center on the race-conscious implementation of Assembly Bill 705. This bill aimed to reform developmental education in California and maximize the probability that a student will enter and complete transfer-level coursework in English and math within a one year of beginning college.

- A brief on newly available part-time student data, including data showing that historically excluded students are more likely to attend college part-time and that part-time students are less likely to complete college.

> "Never doubt that a small group of committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."
>
> —*Margaret Mead, Anthropologist*

RESOURCES

Understanding the Equity Problem

- Center for Urban Education. CUE's Racial Equity Tools.
- Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. *The Cost of Economic and Racial Injustice in Postsecondary Education.*
- National Association of System Heads. *Equity Action Framework.*
- Postsecondary Value Commission.
- Remember the Dreamers.
- Urban Institute. *Racial and Ethnic Representation in Postsecondary Education.*

Equity and Higher Education Policy

- Center for Urban Education. *Equity, Attainment and State Policy.*
- ¡Excelencia in Education! Various policy reports.
- Institute for Higher Education Policy. *"Opening the Promise:" The Five Principles of Equitable Policymaking.*
- Lumina Foundation. *Advancing Equity through Postsecondary Education Policy and Practice.*

Databases and Tools

- The Education Trust. College Results Online.
- ¡Excelencia in Education! Hispanic-Serving Institutions Data: 2019–2020.
- Racial Equity & Justice Institute. *Leading for Change Racial Equity and Justice Institute Practitioner Handbook.*

Communicating about Equity

- Next Chapter Communications. *Inside Story: How Community Colleges Can Use Internal Communications to Advance Transformational Change* and *Inside Story Tools.*
- *Voices of Pathways* Film Series (five documentary films, each about 10 minutes long).

Going Deeper

- American Indian Higher Education Consortium. *Student Success at Tribal Colleges and Universities.*
- Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society. *Targeted Universalism Policy & Practice.*
- UNCF. *HBCUs Punching Above Their Weight.*

Acknowledgments

COMPLETE COLLEGE AMERICA

@CompleteCollege 🐦

@CompleteCollegeAmerica 💼

www.completecollege.org